

The Senate Standing Committees on Finance and Public Administration's Inquiry into Domestic violence in Australia

Submission by:

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ABOUT MEN'S WELLBEING Inc

Men's Wellbeing, based in Queensland, is incorporated as a not-for-profit community volunteer organisation that has been operating without any form of government assistance for 21 years.

Men's Wellbeing runs facilitated support groups and gatherings from Cairns in the north to Melbourne in the south of Australia.

The organisation was host agency for the 2013 National Men's Health Gathering in Brisbane and was winner of the Australian Men's Health Forum "National Award for Service to Men and Boys by an Organisation".

We support and work closely with a sister organisation, Women's Wellbeing Association.

The Patron: Of Men's Wellbeing is renowned Australian family psychologist **Steve Biddulph**.

The organisation's mission statement is:

"We focus on developing the wellbeing of men to foster healthy relationships, families and communities. As a community, we provide innovative nation-wide experiential programs that enable men to support men through groups, gatherings and resources."

Men's Wellbeing is a non-political organisation focused solely on providing support services to promote healthy men, healthy families and communities. We applaud and encourage efforts to resolve and prevent ALL forms of family violence and efforts to provide support and resources for ALL victims and perpetrators, regardless of gender.

The opportunity is welcomed to make submissions to this inquiry and to contributing to healthy family relating and equitable, compassionate solutions in addressing the serious social issue of violence and abuse against women, men and children.

“With family violence, we had to address ‘women and children first’; but in 2009, the troubling nub of violence is in families where both partners are violent, as well as those most hidden, where women hit men. Today nobody approves of or accepts wife bashing. Husband bashing needs this same condemnation and action.” - Steve Biddulph, Australian family psychologist, author of titles including *Manhood, Raising Boys, Raising Girls, The Secret Of Happy Children, The Secret Of Happy Parents*.

TERMS OF REFERENCE ADDRESSED

The prevalence and impact of domestic violence in Australia as it affects all Australians

This submission points to the vast and growing amount of independent, peer-reviewed and widely-recognised evidence that men make up at least one-third and often more of the demographic experiencing family and domestic violence.

It also addresses the widely-recognised gap in provision of support services and resources for men and often their children needing to escape or deal with domestic violence.

While recognising that continuing support services are vital for women and children suffering the effects of violence, this submission is that the pressing social issue of domestic / family violence can most effectively be addressed by an inclusive approach of gaining an accurate picture of ALL domestic violence – that perpetrated by both men and women, what is reciprocal, and that experienced by both women and men and their children.

It also submits that a national approach must be guided by examining ALL of the scientific evidence and not be influenced by ideology, gender politics, emotionally-clouded debate or gender bias.

ADDRESSING HIGH LEVELS OF GENDER BIAS IN SOME COMMONLY-REFERENCED RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:-

What is of deep concern is the ongoing and sometimes worsening bias in some Government-sponsored research methodology and the continuing failure to address it.

In some cases these biases would arguably not be acceptable in basic academic standards of research integrity, yet they continue to be utilised and create a distorted perception of the true nature of domestic and family violence.

Many of these surveys have a strong influence on shaping public perceptions and influencing Government policy and law-making on domestic and family violence.

The **Australian Bureau Of Statistics-conducted National Personal Safety Survey (PSS)** is of particular concern.

Despite repeated calls for this highly-regarded and quoted survey to achieve gender parity and include an equal number of female and male respondents, the survey has consistently shown an immense bias towards a female survey sample.

The 2005 survey included 11,800 females but only 4500 males. This heavy gender bias became even worse in the 2012 survey, where only 22% of respondents were male – less than one-quarter.

This gender bias had the effect of rendering some critical male statistics to the level of being regarded as too unreliable for general use because of the small sample. E.G: The rate of men reporting current partner violence in the 12 months prior to interview quadrupled (a significant rise of **394%**).

Despite the inherent gender bias, the 2012 PSS survey still showed the rate of men reporting current partner violence since the age of 15 almost doubled (**a rise of 175%**) since the 2005 survey.

Also of concern is that the panel of consulting organisations making up the steering committee for the Personal Safety Survey has a strong dominance by organisations representing women's interests and includes little if any representation from men's organisations. This is seen as unhelpful in creating bipartisan strategies and co-operative, gender-inclusive solutions.

Varying approaches to research methodology

There are notably at least two distinct and varying types of research methodology often employed in approaches to domestic / family violence.

One body of research is frequently characterised by setting out to authenticate a pre-determined ideological perspective that domestic / family violence is a gendered crime that men perpetrate on women. This viewpoint often has as its basis the feminist-ideological perspective of the Duluth model which prescribes that partner violence has its cause in men's "patriarchal control over women". Much of this research approach tends to survey mostly women's experience of domestic or family violence and places little emphasis on their incidence of perpetration or of male experience.

It is unfortunate that media exposure of much of this avenue of research presents only female experience of domestic / family violence and excludes corresponding male statistics, hence an often distorted public perception of the true extent of this broader social issue.

This public and Government perception creates further obstacles to men's ability and confidence in reporting their experience of domestic violence and reinforces the common perception they will not be believed.

Conversely, a mounting body of independent international and national research that studies equal samples of males and females and canvasses both victimhood and perpetration rates equally – is consistently revealing almost gender parity in both perpetration and victimhood.

This submission is that a true and accurate picture of domestic and family violence can only be gained and fairly guide policy-making when there is gender parity in research methods and both genders are surveyed equally of both their experience and perpetration of partner violence.

SOME SIGNIFICANT RECENT RESEARCH AND STUDIES VERIFYING LEVELS OF MALE VICTIMHOOD INCLUDE:-

Australian Bureau Of Statistics, National Personal Safety Survey 2012

- One in three victims of current partner violence during the last 12 months (**33.3%**) and since the age of 15 (**33.5%**) were male
- More than one in three victims of emotional abuse by a partner during the last 12 months (**37.1%**) and since the age of 15 (**36.3%**) were male. Around half of these men experienced anxiety or fear due to the abuse
- At least one in three victims of stalking during the last 12 months (**34.2%**) were male
- Around one in three victims of physical violence by a boyfriend/girlfriend or date since the age of 15 (**32.1%**) were male
- More than one in three victims of physical and/or sexual abuse before the age of 15 (**39.0%**) were male
- The rate of men reporting current partner violence since the age of 15 almost doubled (**a rise of 175%**) since 2005 (an estimated 119,600 men reported such violence in 2012)
- The rate of men reporting dating violence since the age of 15 also rose by **140%** since the 2005 survey
- The rate of men reporting current partner violence in the 12 months prior to interview quadrupled (a rise of **394%**), however these estimates are considered too unreliable for general use because of the small number of men interviewed (the ABS surveyed 11,800 females but only 4,500 males in 2005 - a sampling gender bias that worsened in the 2012 survey, where only 22% of respondents were male)
- The vast majority of perpetrators of dating and partner violence against men were female - only 6 or 7% of incidents involved same-sex violence
- Men were less than half as likely as women to have told anybody about partner violence, to have sought advice or support, or to have contacted the police.

Australian Institute Of Criminology, 2008 – 2010 Homicide Data:

In **36% of family-related deaths** where the victim was over 18 years of age, **the victim was male.** (This is only 14% away from gender parity).

A breakdown of statistics by gender:

31 female victims murdered by their husbands

8 male victims murdered by their wives
(21% male)

26 female victims murdered by their male defacto partner
13 male victims murdered by their female defacto partner
(33% male)

14 female victims murdered by their ex-defacto partner
0 male victims murdered by their ex-defacto partner
(0% male)

2 female victims murdered by their boyfriend
3 male victims murdered by their girlfriend
(60% male)

1 female victim murdered by their ex-boyfriend
1 male victim murdered by their ex-girlfriend
(50% male)

The NSW Government Domestic Violence Inquiry 2012

In August 2012, the NSW Government Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues released its report on domestic violence trends and issues in NSW. It is believed to be the first inquiry to properly acknowledge the existence, needs, barriers to reporting and barriers to accessing support faced by male victims of family violence.

Significantly, the Committee also advised the NSW Government that legislation and policy should be written in **gender neutral terminology**. They also strongly recommended that male victims and female perpetrators be addressed in the NSW Government's forthcoming Domestic and Family Violence Framework.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, more than 100,000 men in NSW have experienced violence from their partner.

The findings of this NSW report included:

- “There was a broad recognition among inquiry participants that women offenders and male victims do exist” (p.218). “Of [reported] victims of domestic assault in 2010, 69.2% were female, while 30.8% were male.” (p.28)
- “Male victims have been much less visible and able to access supports than should be the case” (p.xxiv)
- “The experience of [males]... is equally as bad as that of other victims” (p.xxxii)
- Recognising “the gap in services for male victims and [encouraging] the government to examine how services can most appropriately be provided to male victims of domestic violence” (p.xxxii)
- Identifying males as “in need of special consideration with regard to domestic violence,” along with Aboriginal people, older people, people with disability, and several other population groups (p.89)
- The Inquiry recommended that the entire system for preventing and responding to family violence needed to take account of, and be effective for, all victims and perpetrators: not just women and children victims and male perpetrators as had previously been the case.

This submission points out that the commonly promoted view that family/domestic violence is a gendered crime perpetrated almost solely by men against women is inherently false, unhelpful to creating real solutions and, as demonstrated above, is not supported by current statistics and analysis.

MOTIVATIONS BY GENDER:-

It is commonly claimed, both in media reports and official documents, that women's violence perpetrated against men is almost exclusively motivated by self-defence.

However there is a large volume of valid evidence showing that while both women and men do resort to domestic violence as a means of defence in some cases, the vast majority of domestic / family violence incidents are motivated by the same reasons for both men and women.

Some referenced bodies of research illustrating this are listed here:-

- Self-defence is cited by women as the reason for their use of IPV (including severe violence such as homicide) in a small minority of cases (from 5 to 20 per cent). **1 2 3 5 6 7 9 10 12**
- In a study where self-defence was given as a reason for women's use of IPV in a large number of cases (42%), it was cited as a reason for men's IPV more often (56%). **12**
- Rather than self-defence, reasons commonly given by both women and men for their use of IPV include:
 - coercion (dominance and control)
 - anger
 - punishing a partner's misbehaviour
 - jealousy
 - confusion
 - "to get through" (to one's partner)
 - to retaliate
 - frustration **6 7 8 9 12**
- Rather than self-defence, reasons commonly given by women for their use of IPV include
 - disbelief that their male victims would be injured or retaliate
 - they wished to engage their partner's attention (particularly emotionally)
 - their partner not being sensitive to their needs
 - their partner being verbally abusive to them
 - their partner not listening to them **3 8 9**
- Reciprocal partner violence (which makes up approximately 50 per cent of all IPV and is the most injurious to women) does not appear to be only comprised of self-defensive acts of violence. **2 3 13**
- Men and women initiate IPV (both minor and severe) at around the same rates and women are equally likely or more likely to perpetrate violence against a non-violent partner. **2 3 11**
- Women are more likely than men to hit back in response to provocation. **2**
- Women are more likely than men to kill their partner in self-defence, however overall, only 10 to 20 per cent of women's partner homicides are carried out in self-defence or in response to prior abuse. **4 11**

- Women's use of IPV, rather than being reactive to male violence, is predictable by kindergarten age, and certainly by the teenage years. Aggressive girls grow up to be aggressive adults. High incidence rates of personality disorders are found in both male and female court-mandated samples of IPV perpetrators. Women who kill their husbands are just as likely to have criminal records as women who kill in other circumstances. **2 4 11 12**

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THE SHAPING OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF DOMESTIC / FAMILY VIOLENCE

It should be taken into account the limited number of men's resource services able to provide a corresponding picture of this issue as it affects men.

It is admirable that virtually every State has a public-funded Minister and an Office for women and there are national offices representing women along with shelters and various State agencies, resource centres and groups for domestic violence – the vast majority of which deal with women only and provide feedback on women's experience of domestic / family violence.

Likewise the majority of Australia's universities have a Centre For Women's Studies or gender studies providing research largely from a perspective of female experience.

All of these various public-supported services have the resources to be able to provide feedback influencing government policy and also a continued stream of media information on women's experience of domestic / family violence.

Conversely there are very few, if any, funded State agencies representing men, there are virtually no shelters or refuges for men escaping domestic violence and very minimal university centres for men's studies and research.

The agencies that do exist that can provide an accurate picture of men's experience of domestic violence are often self-funded or have very limited resources and capabilities to be able to provide a balancing perspective to both governments and media. Hence the public and government perceptions of this pressing social issue are often heavily skewed towards a female-only perspective.

It is unfortunate that the vast majority of information provided to the media and disseminated to the public is from a female-only viewpoint and rarely includes corresponding male statistics to provide a balanced and accurate picture.

The media aspect that is regularly promoted is that domestic / family violence is a gendered crime that only men do to women. Aspects of male victimisation are regularly downplayed, minimised, invalidated or vastly under-reported.

Media reporting is often characterised by highly-emotive content, campaigns aimed at shaming men, and emotively-portrayed individual cases that can cloud relevant statistics and prevent objective appraisal of all valid research.

One of the most fundamental of media professional ethics is to recognise and accurately cover all aspects of a story in a fair and balanced way without bias or prejudice. Yet in coverage of domestic / family violence issues, this standard is very rarely applied.

It is the recommendation of this submission that the inquiry recognise and take into account the vast imbalance in public reporting and the shortage of men's resources able to provide the necessary balance and perspective of an issue affecting both genders. It is submitted also that the inquiry give equal weight to the valid information and statistics on male experience of victimisation and that public policy and its wording should encourage open, factual inquiry, gender balance, co-operative alliances - and discourage the

promotion of highly-emotive, adversarial public debate and gendered official terminology that can only promote an unhelpful “gender battle”.

TRANSPARENCY AND DISCLOSURE

The link between domestic / family violence, its effect on children and as an influence on and predictor of future violence trends is often referred to in official literature. The taxpayer-funded program to “Stop Violence Against Women And Their Children” is a clear example of this strategy.

While well-intentioned and deserving of public support, this title in itself is a clear reflection of entrenched official attitudes that violence is perpetrated only by men against women and children.

However, statistics released by the West Australian Department Of Child Protection in 2009 under Freedom Of Information legislation and covering a two-year period through 2008 and 2009, clearly showed biological mothers were responsible for three times more verified cases of child abuse than natural fathers.

The statistics – relating to rates of physical, emotional and psychological abuse and neglect - were claimed by some child safety experts to be reflective of national trends and in one case were supported by earlier figures from the Abused Child Trust of Queensland.

Yet significantly, every other State apart from West Australia denied FOI requests to release child abuse perpetrator statistics by gender. Instead the false perception that only men are accountable for the abuse of women and children is actively promoted and allowed to perpetuate.

The focus of this program excludes men as parents and those women who are perpetrators, and by its nature becomes a barrier to men reporting valid experiences of abuse against them and investigation of abuse against children by women.

It also prevents female perpetrators from obtaining the help and support they need and allows the abuse of children to continue.

If the slogan “**Break the silence**” is to have full integrity and credibility, it also needs to apply to full Government department disclosure of information regarding gender statistics so the public is afforded a complete picture. It seems highly unethical and questionable that statistics on male perpetrators of violence and abuse are actively promoted on official websites and in public information, while statistics on female perpetration rates can be selectively withheld.

It is the recommendation of this submission that the inquiry investigate and address the withholding of information that could allow the public an accurate and full picture of family violence – including child abuse - so that effective strategies can be applied by community agencies where help and support is needed. It is submitted that effective solutions to and halting inter-generational cycles of family and domestic violence can only be hindered and not aided by perceived secrecy and non-disclosure.

It is also recommended that to best serve effective solutions, statistics and reporting of child abuse and domestic violence be handled by independent tribunals that are non-gender political, publicly accountable and required to report findings publicly.

CONCLUSION

While addressing violence against women and children is vital and is unquestioningly supported, there is a chronic need to equally address domestic violence against men and to equally provide support services and resources for these men, and often their children.

There is a need to also recognise that many men experiencing domestic / family violence from partners likewise have children who are being abused by female partners.

It is this submission that to consistently ignore, discriminate against and exclude a widely-proven demographic in male victims of domestic / family violence and to ignore the substantial evidence of their existence, does not comply with the integrity of the United Nations Charter on Basic Human Rights.

It is also acknowledged that while it is well proven there is a category of offenders (both male and female) who resort to extreme violence and

intimidation as a means of control – there is also a need to recognise that many cases of inter-partner violence and abuse are reciprocal and more effectively dealt with from an approach of relationships dynamics counseling and conflict resolution education strategies.

Thank you for your consideration and the opportunity for inclusion in this valuable Inquiry and discussion that, it is hoped, will lead to more effective solutions and policies for both men and women equally and the fostering of more respectful relating and education.

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